

**THE SOCIAL STATUS OF  
JAPANESE WOMEN**

BY

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**KOKUSAI BUNKA SHINKOKAI**  
(The Society for International Cultural Relations)  
TOKYO, 1937

First Edition December, 1935  
Second Edition May, 1937

Printed in Japan

## EDITORIAL NOTE

It is the belief of many interested people, both foreign and Japanese, those living abroad and those living in Japan, that a firmly founded relation of mutual respect and esteem is necessary through scholarly study and appreciation of present and past cultures of other nations and peoples.

To date the Japanese people have been deeply engrossed in appraising and studying the cultures of other nations, and the matter of interchange of ideas and cultures has been onesided. Although meagerly developed, this balance of mutual study and appreciation is gradually beginning to be restored by many Western students and interested friends.

However, owing to language difficulties and differences in modes of procedure, the Japanese people have not been very articulate or helpful in assisting foreigners to study and understand Japan. It is the desire of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai to assist all scholars, and others interested, in their study of Japanese culture, encouraging a true exchange of cultural study and appreciation.

The desire was partly materialized in the first "Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai Lecture Series on Japanese Culture" which began on October 15th of this year and came to a successful close on December 6th.

This pamphlet is the record of a lecture delivered by Mrs. Waka Yamada, a well-known woman journalist who conducts a

column of advice for women in the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper, on October 15 at the headquarters of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai. The lecture was translated and read by Miss Miya Sannomiya, who also interpreted the discussion.

December 1935

KOKUSAI BUNKA SHINKOKAI

## *The Social Status of Japanese Women*

**T**he subject which I have been asked to present to you to-day is "The Social Status of Japanese Women". However, before entering into its discussion I should like to explain some of the national characteristics of Japan as a background for the presentation of the subject.

The first point that I should like to have you all know is that Amaterasu Ōmikami, enshrined at Ise, the mother, creator and protector of the Japanese people, is a Goddess, . . . is a woman! As you may know, according to tradition and custom at least once in one's life time all true Japanese must worship at the Ise Shrine. The grandson of Amaterasu Ōmikami, or the Sun Goddess as she is often called in English, is Jimmu Tenno, the first Emperor of Japan and the direct ancestor of His Imperial Majesty, the present Emperor of Japan.

The second point that should be stressed is the fact that the Japanese nation is founded and based upon the family system. This condition was not brought about through the caprice nor the peculiar will of the Japanese people but was due to the general laws of nature and the universe. And thus, just as those of the West like to think of the universe as having been created by one Creator and Father and of ourselves as the children, so that same general idea applies to the Japanese nation. Japan to the Japanese

represents one big family, unified, represented and headed by the Emperor.

The Japanese ideograph for Emperor or "*Tenno*" is as represented here "Kow" 皇. The upper line denotes heaven, the middle line earth, and the bottom line people. The upper word "Haku" 白 (white) represents truth and purity and the middle verticle line joins purity and truth with heaven, earth, and man. Here it may be observed that the Japanese Imperial House has continued unbroken from Jimmu Tenno, the first Emperor, to the present time joining heaven, earth and man through dispensation of truth.

Just as the Emperor is the head of the nation so the husband is the master of the family. The ideograph "Shu" 主 (head of the family) is the same as the bottom half for Emperor. Thus the master of the family follows truth in dispensing with his duties in heading the family. This, perhaps, is the fundamental idea underlying the family system.

Family life consists of two pillars, the husband and wife. Together they procreate, they work to protect and to guard their children. But this family needs someone to lead and to represent this unit and man was thus chosen as the head. This head of the family has absolute powers in the matter of property rights and the education and rearing of his children. And in the exercise of his powers he is commanded by an Imperial rescript to protect his family, and to promote its welfare and happiness.

Originally, the family was intended to be knit together by love where the master lovingly and solicitously cared for and protected his wife and children, and his family looked up to him and depended upon him with affection and deep respect. And thus in

olden times a woman was a very faithful, obedient, happy wife. A husband gloried in meritorious service for his nation, always ready to give up his life for his Emperor. A husband lived for his country. A wife, in turn, lived for her husband. In this way the country was protected and strengthened as one national family through the united firmness and solidity of each individual family unit. This was and is the real Japanese spirit.

However, this power and authority given to man began in time to be misinterpreted and misused and from early times woman has come to be regarded as a being incapable of earning an independent livelihood, . . . as a parasitic animal.

Those with a cold and scientific eye look at present day Japan and say that ideal family life is dying out, but I do not think so. The present day unhappy and unsatisfactory conditions must be remade. I only think that we are on the road towards the recreation of a more ideal family life.

It must be admitted that the social status of Japanese women to-day presents a sorry spectacle. However, there are many ideal families in Japan where the husband in love and understanding looks after the welfare of his wife and family. In such families it does not matter if the wife has no property rights, if she has no legal authority over her children, or if a double standard of morals exists. In such a family the husband's power and authority are used after discussion and agreement between husband and wife. Such a man uses his right of property control for the welfare of his wife and children and they need never suffer therefrom. In such a family, even though the father has complete authority over his children according to law, he will not forget to take into account the mother love and wishes of his wife in carrying out

his duties. Such a husband respects the sacredness of motherhood, fatherhood and the family and will not become untrue to his wife and family. It must be pointed out that a certain percentage of the people belong to this ideal group. They form the salt of the earth and are the firm pillars on which the future of the nation rests. But what I am about to discuss does not belong to this ideal class but to an entirely different group where man's leadership and authority have been misdirected.

Thus, it gradually came to pass that ideas, customs and even laws dealt with man as the head and centre of the family. In a country where a man was considered the head, the centre around which the wheel of family life turns, a woman was regarded as a being born into the world just for the sake of man and was treated as such. Misconceived and misapplied conceptions have gradually and increasingly come to oppress and prevent woman from fully and freely living her life as a mother and a woman as God intended.

For instance, in olden days when men became unfaithful the women said, "A woman's jealousy is a shameful thing," and they may have suffered intensely inwardly but outwardly they remained calm and smiling.

However, under the same circumstances to-day an intelligent, thoughtful woman and a good mother believes that an immoral, unfaithful husband cannot be the head and protector of a good, clean family, nor the father of worthy future generations. But when they protest, the husbands say, "I am lord and master and can do whatever I please," and past traditions, customs and even laws will support him. Then a woman may turn to her parents for sympathy and assistance but they would say to her, "Just as



long as he can take care of you and protect you he is fulfilling his duties as head of the family. He is entitled as a man to indulge at times." In desperation the woman looks to the law for protection. However, according to our laws a woman who commits adultery is punishable but a man is free to do so.

Here may I mention another matter. The desires of women who wished to carry on the ideals of beautiful family life and of womanhood and motherhood were oppressed and suppressed by such traditions and customs. At a time when women were driven almost to the point of suffocation a newspaper suggested that all women with problems and worries of their own write in for advice through its columns, and vast multitudes rushed to take advantage of the offer.

The Asahi Newspaper with which I am connected made this offer four and a half years ago in May 1931. Between May 1st and Dec. 25th of that year 17,052 letters poured in. The black clouds of women's suffering and oppression overflowed the newspaper offices and overwhelmed me.

A long time ago when Amaterasu Ōmikami lived on earth and reigned the world was bright and sunny. But Susano-o-no-Mikoto, a younger brother, did many things to displease her and she hid herself in a cave. Then the world became dark and the gods were in great distress. Devising a scheme they finally drew her out of the cave and the world became bright and happy again. So the legend runs. This, it seems to me, applies not only to the age of the gods but to present day life and conditions.

Giving birth to future generations, loving and rearing them, trying to better and strengthen this nation as good wives and good mothers, we Japanese women are all descendants and counterparts

of Amaterasu Ōmikami. However, the women have been driven into a dark cave by this tendency to look down upon them and to lift up the men only, and especially by this double standard of morality. Among the countless letters received, 99% have to do with the lack of purity and chastity among men.

Recently it has been said that not only among men but among women there are those that have lost their sense of conventions and purity, and of course that is true. And then, too, it must be remembered that there are men who are very pure and with a purity equal to those of women. However, there is a great difference in their proportionate numbers.

Generally speaking, it may be stated that women are for the most part pure and faithful to their husbands and families, but men are not.

Thus, as I see it, a women's movement is necessary to bring out the real motherhood and womanhood that has been pushed into the dark cave of oppression due to the traditions and customs centering around the idea of man as the autocratic leader and master. We must restore womanhood, enrich it and polish it in order that it might brighten the world again.

And now may I say a few words about women and education. In Japan women in public offices have been confined only to school teachers and among them Mme. Utako Shimoda was the only official appointed by the Emperor. In the *shogakko*, or primary schools, and the *jogakko*, or girls' high schools, there are now women workers, or *so-nin*, appointed with the approval of the Emperor, and *han-nin*, or workers of lower rank. Most of the women are mere helpers. In the offices of the Ministry of Communication women are now employed as minor workers and

they stand on the same footing with men in their right to receive old age pensions and a retirement fund upon withdrawal from office. However, there are only a very few such women in this field.

In the race for survival the women of Japan are making their way into men's sphere of work. But under the present conditions where the position and value of womanhood in the family has been ignored, where it has been customary to look upon her as merely a family drudge, she cannot expect to be treated on a par with men even though she may succeed in entering men's sphere of work and even though she may equal them in ability.

From 30-40% of the primary school teachers of Japan are women, or about 40,000 in all. However, the salary of the women teachers is about 30% lower than that of the men.

In the matter of educational institutions there are five universities, six colleges, and seventy-four institutions of higher learning for men. And for women there are only two higher normal colleges under governmental direction two business schools in Tokyo, one in Nagoya, one in Kobe and a great many others are private schools. Then there is Mme. Yayoi Yoshioka's Women's Medical College which opens the path for women interested in medicine, sending out capable women doctors into the world every year. This also is a private school.

Cabinet after Cabinet ignores the problem of education for women.

Now may we go on to touch on the purity movements in Japan to-day? The movement for the abolition of prostitution has been given a strong impetus and a demand was made to abolish the entire nation's licensed districts. It was even rumoured that the

Ministry of Home Affairs intended to abolish this system. The women who had worked so hard in this movement danced with joy at this news. However, this spring when the Imperial Diet convened there was such strong lobbying on the part of owners of licensed quarters, as well as an inclination to let matters stand on the part of so many Diet members, that the good intentions of the Home Ministry faded into thin air. However, one encouraging matter may be noted in this connection and that is the fact that the newspapers did not write a word about it. This may be taken to mean that the newspaper level of ethics is rising.

In the fight for purity and prohibition the Kyofukai, or the W.C.T.U. of Japan, has been waging relentless war and presenting petitions at every session of the Diet. The last Diet was the sixty-seventh session. However, not once has it taken up the matter into serious consideration. It seems that a movement of this kind is hopeless until the moral quality of the nation's men has been lifted.

Here it may be mentioned that women's movements began at the end of the Meiji period about twenty-five years ago. In our past history great women have appeared at times, famous literary women, Empresses of great power and women military leaders who performed great deeds of valour. However, they left no deep impression or effect upon the thinking of average women. In the Meiji period women appeared once more in the literary world and even in the political world but they had no influence on the masses of Japanese women in general. However, women's awakening at the end of the Meiji period was not a thing to be so easily ignored by the people. As you all know, about hundred-forty years ago a movement was begun to raise the general standard of women in

Europe. This movement spread all over Europe and from Europe to America and finally even to Japan deeply stirring and stimulating the women of Japan. This brought about an increased desire for knowledge, a striving for worth of character and high standards, a struggle for economic independence and now there is a tendency to reach out even into politics.

For a long time women were prohibited from attending political meetings or holding such gatherings. However, this was changed fourteen years ago after much earnest effort. Then women's clubs interested in women suffrage, which had been started here and there, united and became the Women's Suffrage League of Japan. This was eleven years ago.

Ten years ago the Universal Manhood Suffrage Act was passed but the politicians did not think of including women in the population from a political consideration. To-day the women's suffrage movement is going on but it seems extremely difficult for them to make headway, and opinions vary even among the suffrage workers themselves. Some believe that they should start on a small scale with political rights in only villages and rural districts. Others believe that women should be given a voice in prefectural governments. Still others claim that they must have all, on an equal with men, or nothing. It must be admitted that a large majority of the politicians of to-day have absolutely no sympathy for this movement and there seems no hope of attaining women suffrage in the near future.

However, in Tokyo City there are many women's organizations assisting in the work of the city. They cannot elect Diet representatives, it is true, but there is much that they can do in the matter of doing actual work requiring women's hands. This

the Tokyo Mayor realizes and a woman has been appointed to assist in the work of the Public Health and Sanitation Department of the City. Then, too, in the new movement for election reforms many women's organizations are included.

Perhaps not to reach out for sweep social changes overnight but to meet the present state of affairs and to extend a helping hand to suffering women, the Federation for the Protection of Mothers was organized last year and is making great progress in its work. In rice culture in order to get a good crop one must take great care of the seed bed where the young rice plants are reared before transplanting. In the same way if we consider the welfare of the people of the future we must look after the welfare of the mothers.

The people of Japan to-day admire the bravery and strength of the military man, and that is good. However, that same people have forgotten the mother whose courage and whose strength will sacrifice sleep and food and life itself for her children and thus in turn for her country.

This strong mother love which has been heaven sent to lighten the world has been trodden upon and recently there have been suicides of mothers and their children as a result of their suffering and hopelessness. These mother and child suicides are a warning to the paralyzed conscience of society. Only one year has passed since the slogan "Protect the Mothers" has been started in order that such living sacrifices may not have been in vain and it is gratifying to see that sympathy is vastly increasing.

This Federation for the Protection of Mothers presented a petition to the last Diet, but on account of crop failures in the northeast districts, typhoons and floods elsewhere, a special session

was called to meet these national disasters. Seeing that nothing especially was planned to help the afflicted mothers and children in these districts the Federation filed a petition which passed both Houses. The Mitsui interests donated three million yen the Mitsubishi interests a million yen and other donations were added for adequate relief work.

At the following regular session of the Diet three bills were presented. (1) A bill for the support of needy mothers and children (2) A home for mothers and children (3) A bill to provide for a source of mediation and arbitration in matters concerning family life. The House of Peers passed all three but the House of Representatives only passed the first two. Still, there is no doubt that this is an epoch-making success in the history of women's movements.

Such big schemes requiring large sums of money and wide organization work can be done only by the united efforts of the whole nation. However, it seems to me that women can help in a very real way, however small that may be. And that way is for those of us who are more fortunate to share our abundance with those less fortunate, widows, fatherless children and other sufferers. This type of relief work is being carried on in Yotsuya-ku at the present time and, as chairman of the committee, I am happy to report that its work is succeeding and growing, although still requiring the help of all thinking women. However, this is not only to help distressed mothers and children alone. The big and final aim of our efforts is to ease the distress of womanhood, to promote a respect for motherhood and to firmly establish her rightful position in society and in the home.

Although my talk has not presented a very beautiful or very

cheerful picture it may be because the womanhood of Japan, like Amaterasu Ōmikami, is hidden in a cave to-day and the world is dark. Perhaps even now the gods are holding counsel as to how to draw her forth from the cave in order to lighten the world with her warm love and sunshine.

Lack of time has prevented me from telling you so many things that should be said and I regret that I must stop with these hasty and incomplete remarks.

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## DISCUSSION

- Q. 1. Are there many Japanese women journalists or is Madame Yamada the only one?
- A. No, I am not the only woman journalist. There are many women engaged in journalistic work.
- Q. 2. Is there not an increasing difficulty in reconciling the old family system with the new type of industrial family system?
- A. Yes, an increasing change between the two systems has been brought about by a great many factors such as the equality of rights between men and women, the rights of mothers, economic independence of women, higher standards of living, vocational education, etc., which have arisen as the result of industrialism. The old family system is gradually waning.
- Q. 3. Who has the right to be the *chō* (head) of the family when the father dies?
- A. When the father dies the eldest son becomes the head of the family. If he is a minor, a guardian is appointed by the family council as a supervisor until he becomes of legal age. If there are no male members in the family the eldest daughter becomes the head and she may keep her headship even after she has taken a *yōshi* (a male who marries into her family), provided it is so arranged before her marriage.
- Q. 4. To what extent does the family council function?
- A. It varies. Financial matters such as contracts, selling or buying properties, or matters of disinheritance, or marriage in

a broad sense, etc., are brought before the family council.

Q. 5. On what grounds can a woman get a divorce in this country?

A. Under the new Civil Code both husband and wife are placed on the same level concerning divorce. The two kinds of divorce recognized by law are consensual and judicial. The former requires the consent of both parties to make the divorce legal. In judicial divorce the following are the grounds for divorce: *inter alia*, bigamy, adultery, sentence for an offence of grave nature, cruel treatments or gross insult making living together unbearable, desertion with evil intent, cruel treatment or gross insult of or by lineal ascendants and uncertainty of whereabouts of the consort, whether dead or alive, for a period of three or more years.—N. Hozumi.

Q. 6. (a). Has a woman any property rights after divorce proceedings? (b). What becomes of her children?

A. (a). About 90% of the divorced women cannot obtain property rights. (b). According to law the husband has complete authority over the children. But in practice the law permits the mother to rear the children if they are very young. When the children attain the age of twenty they can decide for themselves, with the consent of their divorced parents, with which family to live.

Q. 7. How does Madame Yamada reply when women write to her about their husbands' philanderings?

A. My answer is simply as follows: Since each letter I receive differs, I answer accordingly. I shall cite an interesting example. Recently I received a letter from a barber's wife. She and her husband, a very happy but penniless couple, came

from the country to Tokyo in search of wealth. By sharing each other's hardships and troubles they were able to save a fortune with which they founded a chain of barber shops. However, with money and leisure her husband began to frequent amusement places. Then he became friendly with a maid in Atami and brought her to his home in Tokyo. He ordered his wife to get out. In despair, the barber's wife wrote her troubles to me asking for advice. I replied to her letter and told her to stand pat. "Don't leave the house after you have fought side by side with your husband against want, poverty and misery to this day". My advice was taken and the couple are living happily together again.

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The primary purpose of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai is to introduce and encourage interest in, and study and knowledge of, Japanese culture based upon the ideal of furthering worldwide exchange of cultural relations in the cause of international peace and better understanding.

In this connection the Society hopes to undertake all the necessary tasks falling within its province and to keep in contact with, or to extend proper assistance to, individuals and organized bodies actuated by analogous ideals both at home and abroad.

## OUTLINE OF ACTIVITIES

1. Writing, compilation, translation and publication of various works on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to the culture of Japan or other countries.
2. Establishment of chairs on Japanese culture and language in important universities abroad; sending and exchange of professors.
3. Holding of lecture meetings, exhibitions and concerts both at home and abroad.
4. Donation and exchange of documents on culture and works of art.
5. Invitation to Japan of authoritative statesmen, business men, scholars, journalists, thinkers, novelists, and artists from other countries.
6. Provision of facilities for the study of Oriental culture by foreigners both at home and abroad.
7. Sending and exchange of selected students.
8. Production of films, lantern slides, and reproductions, recording the arts and culture of Japan.
9. Establishment of offices, libraries, study rooms, etc., both in Japan and abroad.
10. Maintenance or contact with other bodies or individuals interested in similar lines of work.

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